

Oh, the Tales You'll Tell!

By Kim Hughes Wilhelm and Tom Hughes Wilhelm

Many ESL teachers are interested in storytelling as a resource in teaching. We already know that stories can be used for a wide variety of instructional purposes. For example, they may be a means to activate learner schemata before reading or writing. Storytelling linked with writing projects can be used to engage learners in the sharing of personal narratives, cultural experiences, and folktales. A story theater classroom can work on pronunciation, intonation, and oral fluency. Activities that complement storytelling can be used to practice focused and global language skill building. Storytelling can also prepare academically bound students for further study of literature by helping students to become familiar with structural elements and such literary concepts as episode, plot, setting, characters, climax, and resolution.

The list of storytelling applications to the teaching of English seems endless, yet very few teachers have exposure to the specific "how to's" of storytelling. The storytelling tips given in this article are meant to help the teacher-as-storyteller as s/he prepares for a storytelling "performance" for students.

Table 1 below provides guidelines on how to select appropriate tales and what to consider both during and after storytelling.

When Choosing Your Tales

Language difficulty and content appropriateness are normally the first considerations when selecting which tales to use. The level of difficulty should be within the students' grasp, yet be a bit challenging. As teacher-as-storyteller, consider your own interests, enjoyment, and stylistic talents. Next, examine the story text to see what it lends itself to in terms of language, concept, and critical-thinking development. Write down appropriate instructional objectives in each area, and consider these as lesson and learning guide resources you will need. Note especially the language skills and elements your learners could gain from the interaction. Think about global level skills that could be developed, and consider making an audiotape or videotape of the storytelling event to use later for discrete language skill-building.

Consider how to introduce new vocabulary and reinforce old vocabulary. If the story is likely to be difficult for the students and if you plan to continue with the story event as a regular part of your curriculum, develop multilevel learning guides for before, during, and after story events to keep all learners active. Decide how to provide enough language support and descriptive information for audience familiarity and comfort within the story environment. To further augment the group's comprehension, introduce crucial vocabulary. Follow up by repeating key ideas and vocabulary throughout and after the story event. Extend into interpretive, reflective, and applied activities to encourage further language and concept exploration.

It is usually best to keep the tale simple, with few characters and with built-in repetition. This reduces cognitive load. Repetition also allows for more participant interaction. Ask your students

to make noises, move, and to "tell along" with you when story sections can be predicted. An established purpose and participatory roles help listeners take a more active role during the storytelling event.

Diversity of cultural backgrounds within your group will of course influence the choice of material. A homogeneous group will have a shared oral tradition that will be reflected in your instructional choices. A heterogeneous group may benefit from stories that emerge as similar tales from several cultures. Many folk and fairy tales resemble similar tales from several cultures. Character study or theme plot analysis can similarly provide interesting universal themes that contribute to storytelling group cohesiveness.

Selecting interactive tales will allow the audience opportunities to predict outcomes, to solve problems, and to think critically by comparing, contrasting, and synthesizing. Encourage your learners to consider alternative solutions or endings. Use cues to elicit vocal or physical expressions and responses. Help listeners to empathize with characters, and even to assist with the plot and character development.

Consider your class calendar. For an upcoming curricular theme, the story could instructionally activate interest. With a current curricular theme being studied, the story could reinforce or extend instructional targets. Stories can provide historical notes, express societal moral concerns, or serve as a springboard into fantasy and hero quests of a particular group being studied within a language unit. Interpretive and productive use of English can be woven throughout the instructional plan.

When Storytelling

Do your best to prepare the environment. If possible wear clothing that complements the storytelling event. Use props, teaching aids, and sound effects or background music native to the culture in the tales. Arrange seating to "set a stage" and diminish distractions. If inside, always have the backs of audience members toward the doors or windows. If outside, similarly reduce visual distractions and seat the audience in shade or with their backs to the sun.

Prepare the audience for listening by drawing upon background knowledge about the context or theme. If you have adapted a tale from a book, show the book while giving credit to the author and source used. If you plan to be a narrator or character within the tale, introduce your specific position or role. Plan how you can provide a chronological and geographical entrance to the story. Briefly explain cues, and rehearse the audience in their roles.

If you sufficiently practice aloud your storytelling in advance, you should know where you are going with the tale and how to get there. Whenever possible, integrate props, key words, gestures, and descriptions specific to the culture and region portrayed in the story. It is very important that the storytelling event flows smoothly, so be careful about ad-libbing. Vary voice inflection and tone along with body movement to keep momentum and audience focus. Evaluate the audience reaction continuously, and increase or decrease involvement depending on the need to stimulate or calm the learners for better story effectiveness. Pay special attention to the most and least involved members of your group. Do not get too involved in how you seem to be doing, simply maintain story focus.

This may sound blatantly obvious, but always remember to provide an exit from the story. If you set the stage accordingly, a retraveling of the path will help group members clarify segments and elements of the tale.

After Storytelling

Make this shared experience real and meaningful. Consider how to make an immediate transition into activities that encourage reflection and extension and that maintain group enthusiasm. Provide means for individual and shared reflection, and organize group sharing and assimilation of information into the current unit being studied.

Along these lines, consider the advantages of team teaching. Students may enjoy interacting with students of another class. This can make the story even more of a special event. The two teachers can take turns as the storyteller and instructional guide; they may even wish to tell the story as a team.

Regardless of whether you work by yourself or with another teacher, plan formative evaluation such as peer review, student feedback, and self evaluation. If possible, videotape the session; later, view and evaluate yourself. Do not get discouraged. Work through the glitches before you have your next storytelling session with students. Practice, then do it again! You will only get better. Good luck!

A Short Bibliography of Folktales

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Table 1: Storytelling Tips

| When choosing your Tales, consider... | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--|---|
| Language Difficulty | | Content Appropriateness | Cognitive Load |
| Instructional Objectives | | Interactive Opportunities | Extension Opportunities |
| When story telling... | | | |
| Prepare the environment | Prepare the audience for listening | Know where you are headed and how to get there | Evaluate continuously and adapt accordingly |
| After storytelling... | | | |
| Make your shared experience real through extension and reflection activities. | | Evaluate and reflect in order to improve. Try again! | |

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